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ABSTRACT

Peer helpers can act as liaisons to high school guidance departments by identifying problems, making appropriate referrals, and encouraging others to obtain professional help if necessary. An active program can help ensure that in the future students are better prepared to handle conflicts that arise within marriage, career, and family. This study assesses the problems most troubling to adolescents today and the effectiveness of a peer helper training program. It was hypothesized that the major problems faced by students in the high school would fall into the broad categories of family, friends, and stress. It was also expected that the peer helpers would view their training as preparing them well to handle the problems presented by their classmates. A self-report questionnaire was designed to evaluate how frequently peer helpers were approached for help with various problems and the peer helpers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their training. Of all the presenting problems, discussion of friendships was found to be the most prevalent. The majority of academic problems brought to natural helpers dealt with grades and goals. The Training Satisfaction Scale scores indicated that helpers evaluated their preparation positively. Survey questions are appended. (Author/EMK)

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High School Peer Helping:

A Program Evaluation

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Abstract

Peer helpers can act as liaisons to high school guidance departments by identifying problems, making appropriate referrals, and encouraging others to obtain professional help if necessary. An active program can help ensure that in the future students are better prepared to handle conflicts that arise within marriage, career, and family. The purpose of the present study was to assess the problems most troubling to adolescents today as perceived by their trained peer helpers. In addition, the perceived effectiveness of the peer helper training program was evaluated. It was hypothesized that the major problems faced by students in the high school would fall into the broad categories of family, friends, and careers. It was also expected that the peer helpers would view their training as preparing them well to handle the problems presented by their classmates. To investigate these hypotheses, a self-report questionnaire was designed to evaluate how frequently peer helpers were approached for help with various problems and the peer helpers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the training they received before assuming their responsibilities. For interpretive purposes, the components of the Presenting Problem Scale were divided into three categories: general problems, specific problems, and academic problems. Of all the presenting problems, discussion of friendships was found to be the most prevalent. World issues were rarely broached. The majority of academic problems brought to peer helpers dealt with grades and goals. The Training

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Satisfaction Scale scores indicated that helpers evaluated their preparation positively.

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Introduction

When adolescents experience frustrations, worries, and other life events, they typically turn to their friends for help, advice, practical assistance, and support. As efforts to strengthen what friends have to offer increased, peer helper programs gained in popularity as a method for dispute resolution in the 1960's and 1970's (Latham, 1997). Peer helpers, often called natural helpers or peer mediators, work with other students in a variety of ways. Peer helpers can act as liaisons by identifying problems, making appropriate referrals, and encouraging others to obtain professional help if necessary. Peer helper programs are often instituted to free teachers to concentrate on performing academic tasks, to improve school-based support for students, and to reduce the amount of crisis intervention needed from support services.

Johnson and Johnson (1994) believe that establishing a peer helpers program encourages constructive handling of conflicts in high schools. They also noted that many beneficial advantages accompany peer helper program implementation. An active program can help ensure that in the future, students are prepared to handle conflicts that arise within marriage, career, and family. If adolescents are taught to manage conflicts constructively at an early age, they are more apt to use and maintain conflict resolution skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

Insight into how adolescents handle conflicts is necessary to implement a successful peer helper program. Research by Kristel

and Young (1996) showed that adolescents most commonly turned to friends for help with problems rather than to parents or high school staff members. A small percentage (13.9%) turned to parents for advice, while 13.7% turned to a combination of both friends and parents (Kristel & Young, 1996). Research findings such as these, that uphold the notion that adolescents seek their peers for help, lays the theoretical foundation for peer helper programs. Correctly implemented in a high school, peer helper programs can enhance existing support networks.

To offer a truly effective education, school administrators and faculty must understand the issues facing adolescents today. When aware of the specific problems faced by their students, administrations can design and implement more effective programs to help students cope with these challenges. In an effort to identify student-perceived problems in a medium-sized, public, suburban high school, Young, Kristel and Chambliss (1997) surveyed high school students in the eighth through eleventh grades. In this study, the top five reported problems were achievement, stress, drug usage, friends, and family. In addition, males reported drug usage as a problem more often than females, while females reported problems with friends and family more frequently.

The purpose of the present study was to assess the problems most troubling to adolescents today as perceived by the trained peer helpers. In addition, the perceived effectiveness of the peer helper training program was evaluated. It was hypothesized that the major problems faced by students in the high school would

fall into the broad categories of family, friends, and stress. It was also expected that the peer helpers would view their training as preparing them well to handle the problems presented by their classmates. To investigate these hypotheses, a self-report measure was designed to evaluate how frequently peer helpers were approached for help with various problems and the peer helpers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the training they received before assuming their responsibilities.

Method

Subjects

Forty-three natural helpers, including thirty-eight high school students (ranging from tenth to twelfth grade) and five high school faculty members responded to a survey administered in a medium-sized public, suburban high school. All subjects were participants in an already existing peer helper program.

Questionnaire

The self-report questionnaire was designed to identify the effectiveness of the program and the training provided to helpers from the perspective of the natural helper. The questionnaire was broken up into three sections. The first of these was comprised of questions related to demographics. The second was a sixteen item, Likert-format Presenting Problem Scale and the third was a sixteen item, Likert-format Training Satisfaction Scale (Appendix A). The subjects' responses were recorded directly on the questionnaire itself.

Procedure

The survey was administered to the members of the natural helpers program during one of their usual meetings. The questionnaire was administered anonymously, to reduce social desirability bias. Individual responses remained confidential.

Results

Means and standard deviations for all items comprising the Presenting Problem Scale and the Training Satisfaction Scale were calculated (see Table 1). For interpretive purposes, the components of the Presenting Problem Scale were divided into three categories: general problems, specific problems, and academic problems.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
ABUSE1	43	1.00	5.00	1.8372	.8710
depression	43	1.00	5.00	2.5814	1.2953
DETENTN1	43	1.00	5.00	2.0000	1.0235
DROPOUT1	43	1.00	5.00	1.4884	.9353
DRUGS1	43	1.00	5.00	2.5349	1.3156
EATING1	43	1.00	5.00	1.6279	1.0471
FAMILY1	43	1.00	5.00	3.2093	1.3012
FRIENDS1	43	1.00	5.00	3.3256	1.2290
MONEY1	43	1.00	5.00	2.2791	1.3332
POPULAR1	43	1.00	5.00	2.3256	1.0402
ROMANCE1	43	1.00	5.00	3.4186	1.3493
SCHOOL1	43	1.00	5.00	2.9535	1.2527
SEX1	43	1.00	5.00	2.8140	1.4185
STRESS1	43	1.00	5.00	3.2093	1.4068
SUICIDE1	43	1.00	5.00	1.9767	1.1441
WORLD1	43	1.00	5.00	1.4186	.9059
Valid N (listwise)	43				

Descriptive Statistics (cont.)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
ABUSE2	43	1.00	5.00	2.0233	1.0116
DEPRSN2	43	1.00	5.00	1.9070	.8399
DETENTN2	43	1.00	5.00	2.2326	1.1513
DROPOUT2	43	1.00	5.00	2.3721	1.1132
DRUGS2	43	1.00	5.00	1.9767	.9633
EATING2	43	1.00	5.00	2.2326	1.1092
FAMILY2	43	1.00	4.00	1.6744	.7145
FRIENDS2	43	1.00	3.00	1.5581	.6656
MONEY2	43	1.00	5.00	2.3953	1.0497
POPULAR2	43	1.00	5.00	1.7674	.8684
ROMANCE2	43	1.00	5.00	1.7674	.8117
SEX2	43	1.00	5.00	2.0000	.8729
SUICIDE2	43	1.00	5.00	2.1163	1.1590
WORLD2	43	1.00	5.00	3.2791	1.4364
effectiveness	43	1.00	3.00	1.5814	.6261
gender	43	1.00	2.00	1.4884	.5058
grade	43	3.00	6.00	4.3256	.9691
INVOLVED	43	1.00	4.00	2.1628	.9742
meetings	43	1.00	5.00	2.3953	1.5757
Valid N (listwise)	43				

General Problems

Of all the presenting problems, discussion of friendships was found to be the most prevalent. Ninety-eight percent of the natural helpers reported being approached on this subject. The next most commonly discussed problems concerned romantic relationships (91%). This was followed by stress and family concerns; two thirds of the helpers encountered each of these problems more than four times. World issues were rarely broached. Less than 25% of the natural helpers reported dealing with this problem (see Table 2).

Table 2

Program Usage by Type of Problem

General Problems

	Never	1-3 times	4+ times
Depression	21%	37%	42%
Family	12%	21%	67%
Friends	2%	30%	68%
Money	33%	39%	28%
Popularity	21%	42%	37%
Romance	9%	21%	70%
Stress	12%	25%	63%
World	77%	12%	11%

Specific Psychological Problems

	Never	1-3 times	4+ times
Abuse	37%	49%	14%
Drugs	23%	35%	42%
Eating Disorder	61%	30%	9%
Sex	16%	40%	44%
Suicide	44%	33%	23%

Academic Problems

	Never	1-3 times	4+ times
Detention	35%	42%	23%
Drop-out	70%	21%	9%
School	9%	33%	58%

Specific Psychological Problems

Over half (61%) of the natural helpers were never approached regarding eating disorders. Nearly half (44%) of the helpers reported never being asked to address the issue of suicide. In contrast, sex, drugs, and abuse were specific problems that were more frequently encountered (see Table 2 above).

Academic Problems

The majority of academic problems brought to natural helpers dealt with grades and goals. While two thirds of the helpers saw students with concerns regarding detention, only 30% encountered the topic of dropping out of school (see Table 2 above).

Table 3

Program Usage: Presenting Problems

High (100%-78%)	Medium (77%-55%)	Low (54%-0%)
Depression (79%)	Abuse (63%)	Dropout (30%)
Family (88%)	Detention (65%)	Eating Disorder (40%)
Friends (98%)	Drugs (77%)	World (23%)
Popular (79%)	Money (67%)	
Romance (91%)	Suicide (56%)	
School (91%)		
Sex (84%)		
Stress (88%)		

In order to determine presenting problem prevalence empirically, items from the Presenting Problem Scale were grouped into three severity categories (High, Medium, and Low) according

to frequency. Issues in the high category were seen 78 or more percent of the time. Issues in the low category were seen 54 or less percent of the time. For specific percentages of each problem, see Table 3 above.

Items from the Training Satisfaction Scale were ranked in order from highest to lowest. While friendship issues ranked highest (100%), ratings of preparation for handling all areas other than world issues were higher than 80%. For a complete listing, see Table 4 below.

Table 4

Program Training: Perceived Adequacy of Preparation

Friends	100%
Family	98%
Popularity	98%
Romance	98%
Stress	98%
Depression	95%
School	95%
Abuse	93%
Drugs	93%
Sex	93%
Detention	88%
Eating Disorders	88%
Money	88%
Suicide	86%
Dropout	84%
World	56%

Discussion

The hypothesis that broad problems would be reported being discussed more frequently was generally supported, only exception being world issues. The natural helpers' perception of training adequacy was consistently reported to be high for each type of problem, again with the exception of world issues.

General Problems

When going through adolescence, most teens are concerned with friends and family. This could be due to the fact that their social system, at this point, is primarily comprised of these people. Romantic relationships are also starting to become a concern during this developmental period. All the problems in this category represent social issues. Depression is seen as a general problem, because it is sometimes characterized by feelings of rejection or social inadequacy. This may go hand in hand with the common desire to be seen as popular or socially accepted.

The only broad problems that were not often reported as being a focus of peer helper meetings were those dealing with world issues (i.e. poverty, hunger). This may reflect the fact that when you are an adolescent your world is made up of the community immediately around you. The students surveyed were generally drawn from a middle-class, suburban environment. Since they are not dealing with these issues directly, they may not seem important. If students of a lower socioeconomic class, urban environment were surveyed, discussion of world issues may have been reported more frequently.

Specific Psychological Problems

Despite the expected low rates of these specific problems in the high school population, peer helpers reported encountering these problems (i.e. abuse, drugs, eating disorders, sex, suicide) with moderate frequency. Due to the sensitive nature of these problems, they may not have been reported to the natural helpers as often as the general problems. Surprisingly, they were seen moderately frequently. A more in-depth exploration of the specific psychological problems may be needed to accurately assess their frequencies. The scale used in this study clustered together the first, second and third times the natural helpers were approached concerning these problems. However, seeing these problems once is quite different from seeing these problems three times.

Academic Problems

Peer helpers' responses suggest that many students make use of this program in order to discuss their scholastic achievements. Peers may be in a position to make an especially valuable contribution when students are struggling to define their academic ambitions, expectations, and future plans.

Effectiveness of Training

Although the natural helpers perceived the adequacy of training to be high for almost all problem areas, this could be due to a number of different factors. This scale was placed at the end of the survey and the subjects may have been eager to finish. Also, even though the subjects remained anonymous, they may have felt pressure to describe the training positively because

they were handing the survey directly back to the head of the program. They may have also felt a sense of loyalty towards the program that they were chosen to represent.

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Appendix A

This survey affects you! Results from this survey will be used to evaluate the training portion of the Natural Helpers Program. Your response is confidential and anonymous.

Please read each question. Although you may have seen some of the questions before, make every attempt to answer as honestly as possible. You may write responses on this sheet.

---

1. I am: A. Male
   B. Female

2. I am in grade: A. 8 B. 9 C. 10 D. 11
   E. 12 F. Faculty

3. I have been involved in this program for _____ years.

4. I have attended _____ meetings and training sessions for the Natural Helpers Program.
   A. 1-5
   B. 6-11
   C. 12-17
   D. 18-24
   E. 25 or more

5. Please indicate how often you have been approached by a peer concerning the following items:
   A. 0 times
   B. 1-3 times
   C. 4-6 times
   D. 7-10 times
   E. more than 10 times

   _____ Abuse (sexual, physical, emotional, or threats of)
   _____ Achievements in school (grades, goals)
   _____ Detention/Suspension/Disciplinary actions
   _____ Depression (loneliness, loss)
   _____ Dropping out of school
   _____ Drug use (marijuana, alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, etc.)
   _____ Eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia, obesity, weight control)
   _____ Family (communication, relationships, conflicts with family members)
   _____ Friendships (jealousy, gossip, communication, support)
   _____ Money (school expenses, living expenses, getting/keeping a job)
   _____ Popularity (fitting in, gossip, belonging, handling peer pressure)
   _____ Romantic relationships (boyfriend/girlfriend)
   _____ Stress (this is a general category)
   _____ Sex-related concerns (sexual/romantic behavior, birth control, pregnancy, sexual identity, sexually transmitted diseases)
   _____ Thoughts of suicide, self-destructive actions, and high-risk behaviors
   _____ World issues (hunger, war, etc.)

6. My training with the Natural Helpers in the following areas has been:
   A. Excellent
   B. Good
   C. Adequate
   D. Needs improvement
   E. Never trained in this area

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Abuse (sexual, physical, emotional, or threats of)
Achievements in school (grades, goals)
Detention/Suspension/Disciplinary actions
Depression (loneliness, loss)
Dropping out of school
Drug use (marijuana, alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, etc.)
Eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia, obesity, weight control)
Family (communication, relationships, conflicts with family members)
Friendships (jealousy, gossip, communication, support)
Money (school expenses, living expenses, getting/keeping a job)
Popularity (fitting in, gossip, belonging, handling peer pressure)
Romantic relationships (boyfriend/girlfriend)
Stress (this is a general category)
Sex-related concerns (sexual/romantic behavior, birth control, pregnancy, sexual identity, sexually transmitted diseases)
Thoughts of suicide, self-destructive actions, and high-risk behaviors
World issues (hunger, war, etc.)

I feel that the Natural Helpers Program is:

A. Extremely effective in helping students with problems
B. Somewhat effective in helping students with problems
C. Could be effective if utilized more by students
D. Not effective
E. Harmful; please explain _____

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